

GUIDE  
TO  
THE PRINCIPAL PICTURES  
IN THE  
ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS  
AT  
VENICE.

*ARRANGED FOR ENGLISH TRAVELLERS*

BY

JOHN RUSKIN,

SLADE PROFESSOR OF FINE ART, OXFORD, AND HONORARY ASSOCIATE OF THE ACADEMY OF VENICE.

VENICE, MDCCCLXXVII.



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[NOTE.—*This guide, if bought at the Porter's table, may conveniently be begun at the top of page 5.*]

## GUIDE, ETC.

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OVER the entrance gate of the Academy are three of the most precious pieces of sculpture in Venice; her native work, dated; and belonging to the school of severe Gothic which indicates the beginning of her Christian life in understanding of its real claims upon her.

St. Leonard on the left, St. Christopher on the right, under Gothic cusped niches. The Madonna in the centre, under a simple gable; the bracket-cornice beneath bearing date, 1345; the piece of sculpture itself engaged in a rectangular panel, which is the persistent sign of the Greek schools; descending from the Metopes of the Parthenon.

You see the infant sprawls on her knee in an ungainly manner:—she herself sits with quiet maiden dignity, but in no manner of sentimental adoration.

That is Venetian naturalism; showing their henceforward steady desire to represent things as they really (according to the workman's notions) might have existed. It begins first in this century separating itself from the Byzantine formalism,—the movement being the same which was led by Giotto in Florence fifty years earlier. These sculptures are the result of his influence, from Padua, and other such Gothic power, rousing Venice to do and think for herself, instead of letting her Greek subjects do all for her. This is one of her first performances, independently of them. She has not yet the least notion of making anybody stand rightly on their feet; you see how St. Leonard and St. Christopher point their toes. Clearly, until we know how to do better than this, in perspective and such matters, our painting cannot come to much. Accordingly, all the Venetian painting of any importance you are now to see in the Academy is subsequent to these sculptures. But these are, fortunately, dated—1378 and 1384. Twenty years more will bring us out of the fourteenth century. And therefore, broadly, all the painter's art of Venice begins in the fifteenth; and we may as well at once take note that it ends with the sixteenth. There are only these two hundred years of painting in Venice. Now, without much pause in the corridor, though the old well in the cortile has its notabilities if

one had time,—up the spiral stairs, and when you have entered the gallery and got your admission tickets—(quite a proper arrangement that you should pay for them,—if *I* were a Venetian prefect, you should pay a good deal more for leave to come to Venice at all, that I might be sure you cared to come,)—walk straight forward till you descend the steps into the first room in the arrangement of the Academy Catalogue. On your right, at the bottom of the steps, you see a large picture (16) in a series of compartments, of which the central one, the Crowning of the Virgin, was painted by a Venetian vicar, (vicar of St. Agnes,) in 1380. A happy, faithful, cheerful vicar he must have been; and any vicar, rector, or bishop who could do such a thing now, would be a blessing to his parish, and delight to his diocese. Symmetrical, orderly, gay, and in the heart of it nobly grave, this work of the old Plebanus has much in it of the future methods of Venetian composition. The two angels peeping over the arms of the throne may remind you to look at its cusped arches, for we are here in central Gothic time; thirty years after the sea-façade of the Ducal Palace had been built.

Now, on the opposite side of the room, over the door leading into the next room, you see (1) in the Academy Catalogue “The work of Bartholomew Vivarini of Murano, 1464,” showing you what ad-

vance had been made in eighty years. The figures still hard in outline,—thin, (except the Madonna's throat, which always, in Venice, is strong as a pillar,) and much marked in sinew and bone, (studied from life, mind you, not by dissection); exquisitely delicate and careful in pure colour;—in character, portraits of holy men and women, such as then were. There is no idealism here whatever. Monks and nuns had indeed faces and mien like these saints, when they desired to have the saints painted for them.

A noble picture; not of any supreme genius, but completely containing the essence of Venetian art.

Next, going under it, through the door, you find yourself in the principal room of the Academy, which please cross quietly to the window opposite, on the left of which hangs a large picture which you will have great difficulty in seeing at all, hung as it is against the light; and which, in any of its finer qualities, you absolutely cannot see; but may yet perceive what they are, latent in that darkness, which is all the honour that the kings, nobles, and artists of Europe care to bestow on one of the greatest pictures ever painted by Christendom in her central art-power. Alone worth an entire modern exhibition-building, hired fiddlers, and all; here you have it jammed on a back wall, utterly unserviceable to human kind, the little angels of it fiddling unseen,



unheard by anybody's heart. It is the best John Bellini in the Academy of Venice; the third best in Venice, and probably in the world. Repainted, the right-hand angel, and somewhat elsewhere; but on the whole perfect; unspeakably good, and right in all ways. Not inspired with any high religious passion; a good man's work, not an enthusiast's. It is, in principle, merely the perfecting of Vivarini's; the saints, mere portraits of existing men and women; the Madonna, idealized only in that squareness of face and throat, not in anywise the prettier for it, otherwise a quite commonplace Venetian woman. Such, and far lovelier, you may see living to-day, if you can see—and may make manifest, if you can paint.

And now, you may look to the far end of the room, where Titian's 'Assumption' has the chairs put before it; everybody being expected to sit down, and for once, without asking what o'clock it is at the railroad station, reposefully admire.

Of which, hear first what I wrote, very rightly, a quarter of a century ago.

"The traveller is generally too much struck by Titian's great picture of 'The Assumption' to be able to pay proper attention to the other works in this gallery. Let him, however, ask himself candidly how much of his admiration is dependent merely on the picture's being larger than any other

in the room, and having bright masses of red and blue in it; let him be assured that the picture is in reality not one whit the better either for being large or gaudy in colour, and he will then be better disposed to give the pains necessary to discover the merit of the more profound works of Bellini and Tintoret."

I wrote this, I have said, *very* rightly, not *quite* rightly. For if a picture is good, it *is* better for being large, because it is more difficult to paint large than small; and if colour is good, it *may be* better for being bright.

Nay, the fault of this picture, as I read it now, is in not being bright enough. A large piece of scarlet, two large pieces of crimson, and some very beautiful blue, occupy about a fifth part of it; but the rest is mostly fox colour or dark brown: majority of the apostles under total eclipse of brown. St. John, there being nobody else handsome to look at, is therefore seen to advantage; also St. Peter and his beard; but the rest of the lower canvas is filled with little more than flourishings of arms and flingings of cloaks, in shadow and light.

However, as a piece of oil painting, and what artists call 'composition,' with entire grasp and knowledge of the action of the human body, the perspectives of the human face, and the relations of shade to colour in expressing form, the picture is

deservedly held unsurpassable. Enjoy of it what you can; but of its place in the history of Venetian art observe these three following points:—

I. The throned Madonnas of Vivarini and Bellini were to Venice what the statue of Athena in the Brazen House was to Athens. Not at all supposed to *be* Athena, or to *be* Madonnas; but symbols, by help of which they conceived the presence with them of a real Goddess. But this picture of Titian's does not profess to symbolize any Virgin here with us; but only to show how the Virgin was taken away from us a long time ago. And professing to represent this, he does not in the least believe his own representation, nor expect anybody else to believe it. He does not, in his heart, believe the Assumption ever took place at all. He is merely putting together a stage decoration of clouds, little boys, with wings stuck into them, and pantomime actors, in studied positions, to amuse his Venice and himself.

II. Though desirous of nothing but amusement, he is not, at heart, half so much amused by his work as John Bellini, or the quarter so much amused as the innocent old vicar. On the contrary, a strange gloom has been cast over him, he knows not why; but he likes all his colours dark, and puts great spaces of brown, and crimson passing into black, where the older painters would

have made all lively. Painters call this 'chiaroscuro.' So also they may call a thunder-cloud in the sky of spring: but it means more than light and shade.

III. You see that in all the three earlier pictures everybody is quiet. Here, everybody is in a bustle. If you like to look at my pamphlet on the relation of Tintoret to Michael Angelo, you will see how this comes to pass, and what it means. And that is all I care for your noticing in the Assumption, just now.

Next, look on right and left of it at the two dark pictures over the doors (63, 25).

Darkness visible, with flashes of lightning through it. The thunder-cloud upon us, rent with fire.

Those are Tintorets; finest possible Tintorets; best possible examples of what, in absolute power of painting, is supremest work, so far as I know, in all the world.

Nothing comes near Tintoret for colossal painter's power, as such. But you need not think to get any good of these pictures: it would take you twenty years' work to understand the fineness of them as painting; and for the rest, there is little good in them to be got. Adam and Eve no more sat in that warm-weather picnic manner, helping each other politely to apples, on the occasion of their fall, than the Madonna went up all bending about

in her red and blue cloak on the occasion of her Assumption. But of the wrong, and the truth, the error, and the glory of these pictures, I have no time to speak now; nor you to hear. All that you have to notice is that painting has now become a dark instead of bright art, and in many ways a frightful and unpleasant art, or else I will add once for all, referring you for proof of it to the general examples of Venetian work at this late epoch, supplied as a luxury to foreign courts, a lascivious art.\*

Nevertheless up to the time when Tintoret painted the Crucifixion in the Scuola di San Rocco, Venice had not in heart abjured her religion. The time when the last chord of its faith gives way cannot be discerned, to day and hour; but in that day and hour of which, for external sign, we may best take the death of Tintoret in 1594, the Arts of Venice are at an end.

I have therefore now shown you the complete course of their power, from 1380 at the Academy

\* One copy of Titian's work bearing such commercial value, and showing what was briefly the Gospel preached by Missionary Venice to foreign nations in the sixteenth century, you will find presently in the narrow corridor, No. 347: on which you will usually also find some modern copyist employed, for missionary purposes; but never on a Vivarini. And in thus becoming dark, terrific, and sensual, Venetian art led the way to the mere naturalism and various baseness of following European art with the rubbish of which that corridor (Sala ix., Numbers 276 to 353,) is mostly filled.

gates, to 1594—say, broadly, two centuries, (her previous art being only architectural, mosaic, or decorative sculpture). We will now go through the rooms, noticing what is best worth notice, in each of the epochs defined; essentially, you observe, three. The first we may call the Vivarini epoch, bright, innocent, more or less elementary, entirely religious art,—reaching from 1400 to 1480; the second, (which for reasons presently to be shown, we will call the Carpaccian epoch,) sometimes classic and mythic as well as religious, 1480—1520; the third, supremely powerful art corrupted by taint of death, 1520—1600, which we will call the Tintoret epoch.

Of course the lives of the painters run in and out across these limits; yet if you fasten these firmly in your mind,—80, 40, 80,—you will find you have an immense advantage and easy grip of the whole history of Venetian art.

In the first epoch, however, I do not mean to detain you; but the room you first entered, into which I will now ask you to return, is full of pictures which you will find interesting if you have time to decipher them, and care for Christianity and its expressions. One only I will ask you to look at, after Titian's Assumption; the little Ascension by Nicolò Semitecolo, low down, on the right of the vicar's picture in Number 16. For that Ascension is painted in real belief that the Ascension *did* take



place; and its sincerity ought to be pleasant to you, after Titian's pretence.

Now, returning up the steps, and taking the corridor to your right, opposite the porter's table, enter the little room through the first door on your right; and therein, just on your right as you go in, is Mantegna's St. George, No. 273. To which, give ten minutes quietly, and examine it with a magnifying glass of considerable power. For in that you have a perfect type of the Italian methods of execution corresponding to the finish of the Dutch painters in the north; but far more intellectual and skilful. You cannot see more wonderful work, in minute drawing with the point of the brush; the virtue of it being that not only every touch is microscopically minute, but that, in this minuteness, every touch is considered, and every touch right. It is to be regarded, however, only as a piece of workmanship. It is wholly without sentiment, though the distant landscape becomes affecting through its detailed truth,—the winding road under the rocks, and the towered city, being as full of little pretty things to be searched out as a natural scene would be.

And I have brought you first, in our now more complete review, to this picture, because it shows more clearly than any other through what tremendous work the Italian masters obtained their power.

Without the inherited strength won by this precision of drawing in the earlier masters, neither Titian nor Tintoret could have existed.

Return into the corridor, and walk along it to the end without wasting time;—there is a Bonifazio, No. 326, worth a painter's while to stop at, but in general mere Dutch rubbish. Walk straight on, and go in at the last door on the left, within which you will find

456, Cima da Conegliano. An entirely sincere and noble picture of the central epoch. Not supreme in any artistic quality, but good and praiseworthy in all; and, as a conception of its subject, the most beautiful you will find in Venice. Grudge no time upon *it*; but look at nothing else here; return into the corridor, and proceed by it into the great room.

Opposite you is Titian's great 'Presentation of the Virgin,' interesting to artists, and an unusually large specimen of Titian's rough work. To me, simply the most stupid and uninteresting picture ever painted by him;—if you can find anything to enjoy in it, you are very welcome: I have nothing more to say of it, except that the colour of the landscape is as false as a piece of common blue tapestry, and that the 'celebrated' old woman with her basket of eggs is as dismally ugly and vulgar



a filling of spare corner as was ever daubed on a side-scene in a hurry at Drury Lane.

On the other side of the room, 543, is another wide waste of canvas; miserable example of the work subsequent to Paul Veronese; doubly and trebly mischievous in caricaturing and defiling all that in the master himself is noble: to look long at such a thing is enough to make the truest lovers of Venetian art ashamed of Venice, and of themselves. It ought to be taken down and burned.

Turn your back to it, in the centre of the room; and make up your mind for a long stand; for opposite you, so standing, is a Veronese indeed, of the most instructive and noble kind (489); and beneath it, the best picture in the Academy of Venice, Carpaccio's 'Presentation' (488).

Of the Veronese, I will say nothing but that the main instructiveness of it is in the exhibition of his acquired and inevitable faults (the infection of his æra), with his own quietest and best virtues. It is an artist's picture, and even, only to be rightly felt by very good artists; the aerial perspectives in it being extremely subtle, and rare, to equal degree, in the painter's work. To the general spectator, I will only observe that he has free leave to consider the figure of the Virgin execrable; but that I hope, if he has a good opera-glass, he will find something to please him in the little rose-bush in

the glass vase on the balustrade. I would myself give all the bushes—not to say all the trees—and all the seas, of Claude and Poussin, in one bunch and one deluge—for this little rose-bush and its bottle.

488. ‘The Presentation in the Temple.’ Signed ‘Victor Carpaccio, 1510.’ From the Church of St. Job.

You have no similar leave, however, good general spectator, to find fault with anything *here*! You may measure yourself, outside and in,—your religion, your taste, your knowledge of art, your knowledge of men and things,—by the quantity of admiration which honestly, after due time given, you can feel for this picture.

You are not required to think the Madonna pretty, or to receive the same religious delight from the conception of the scene, which you would rightly receive from Angelico, Filippo Lippi, or Perugino. This is essentially Venetian,—prosaic, matter of fact,—retaining its supreme common-sense through all enthusiasm.

Nor are you required to think this a first-rate work in Venetian colour. This is the best picture in the Academy precisely because it is *not* the best piece of colour there;—because the great master has subdued his own main passion, and restrained his

colour-faculty, though the best in Venice, that you might *not* say the moment you came before the picture, as you do of the Paris Bordone (492), ‘*What a piece of colour !*’

To Paris, the Duke, the Senate, and the Miracle are all merely vehicles for flashes of scarlet and gold on marble and silk ; but Carpaccio, in this picture of the Presentation, does not want you to think of *his* colour, but of *your* Christ.

To whom the Madonna also is subjected ;—to whom all is subjected : you will not find such another Infant Christ in Venice ; (but always look carefully at Paul Veronese’s, for it is one of the most singular points in the character of this usually decorative and inexpressive painter, that his Infant Christs are always beautiful).

For the rest, I am not going to praise Carpaccio’s work. Give time to it ; and if you don’t delight in it—the essential faculty of enjoying good art is wanting in you, and I can’t give it you by ten minutes’ talk ; but if you begin really to feel the picture, observe that its supreme merit is in the exactly just balance of all virtue ;—detail perfect, yet inconspicuous ; composition intricate and severe, but concealed under apparent simplicity ; and painter’s faculty of the supremest, used nevertheless with entire subjection of it to intellectual purpose. Titian, compared to Carpaccio, paints as a circus-rider rides,

—there is nothing to be thought of in him but his riding. But Carpaccio paints as a good knight rides; his riding is the least of him; and to himself—unconscious in its ease.

When you have seen all you can of the picture as a whole, go near, and make out the little pictures on the edge of St. Simeon's robe; four quite lovely ones; the lowest admitting, to make the whole perfect, delightful grotesque of fairy angels within a heavenly castle wall, thrusting down a troop of supine devils to the deep. The other three, more beautiful in their mystery of shade; but I have not made them out yet. There is one solemn piece of charge to a spirit folding its arms in obedience; and I think the others must be myths of creation, but can't tell yet, and must now go on quickly to note merely the pictures you should look at, reserving talk of them for a second number of this Guide.

483, 500, 524, containing all you need study in Bonifazio. In 500, he is natural, and does his best; in 483, he pretends to religion, which he has not; in 524, to art, which he has not. The last is a monstrous example of the apathy with which the later Italian artists, led by Raphael, used this horrible subject to exhibit their ingenuity in anatomical posture, and excite the feeble interest of vulgar spectators.

503. Quiet Tintoret; very noble in senators, poor in Madonna.

519. Quiet Paul Veronese; very noble in St. Jerome's robe and Lion, and in little St. John's back. Not particularly so in anybody's front, but a first-rate picture in the picture-way.

507. Dashing Tintoret: fearfully repainted, but grand yet in the lighter figures of background.

496—502. Dashing Paul Veronese—splendid in art; in conception of Evangelists—all that Venice wanted of them, at that day. You must always, however, judge her as you would a sailor,—what would be ridiculous or bombastic in others has often some honesty in it with *her*. Think of these Evangelists as a kind of figure-heads of ships.

Enter now the great room with the Veronese at the end of it, for which the painter (quite rightly) was summoned before the Inquisition of State: you will find his examination, translated by a friend to whom I owe much in my old Venetian days, in the Appendix to my second Guide; but you must not stop now at this picture, if you are in a hurry, for you can see the like of it, and better, in Paris; but you can see nothing in all the world, out of Venice, like certain other pictures in this room.

Glancing round it, you see it may be generally described as full of pictures of street architecture,

with various more or less interesting transactions going on in the streets. Large Canalettos, in fact; only with the figures a little more interesting than Canaletto's figures; and the buildings, on the whole, red and white or brown and white, instead of, as with Canaletto, black and white. And on consideration, and observation, you will perceive, if you *have* any perception of colour, that Venetian buildings, and most others, being really red and white or brown and white, not black and white, this is really the right manner of painting them, and these are true and sufficient representations of streets, of landscapes, and of interiors of houses, with the people, as I said, either in St. Mark's Place, 555, or at Grand Cairo, 540, or before the Castle of St. Angelo at Rome, 546, or by the old Rialto here, 564, being themselves also more or less interesting, if you will observe them, first in their dresses, which are very curious and pretty, and afterwards in many other particulars, of which for the present I must leave you to make out what you can; for of the pictures by Carpaccio in this room I must write an entirely separate account, (begun already for one of them only, the Dream of St. Orsola, 533,)\* and of the Gentile

\* Of which, with her legend, if you care to hear more, you will find more in the three numbers of 'Fors Clavigera' now purchaseable of my agent in Venice, (Mr. Bunney, Fondamenta San Biagio 2143,)



Bellini you can only know the value after good study of St. Mark's itself. Observe, however, at least in this, and in 548 and 564, the perfectly true representation of what the Architecture of Venice was in her glorious time; trim, dainty,—red and white like the blossom of a carnation,—touched with gold like a peacock's plumes, and frescoed, even to its chimney-pots, with fairest arabesque,—its inhabitants, and it together, one harmony of work and life,—all of a piece, you see them, in the wonderful palace-perspective on the left in 548, with everybody looking out of their windows. And in this picture of St. Mark's, painted by John Bellini's good brother, true as he could, hue for hue, and ray for ray, you see that all the tossing of its *now* white marble foliage against the sky, which in my old book on Venice I compared to the tossed spray of sea waves, (believing then, as I do still, that the Venetians in their living and breathing days of art were always influenced in their choice of guiding lines of sculpture by their sense of the action of wind or sea,) were not, at all events, meant to be like sea foam white in anger, but like light spray in morning sunshine. They were all overlaid with gold.

Not yet in vicious luxury. Those porches of St. from whom all my recent publications on Venice may be also procured.

Mark's, so please you, English friends, were not thus gilt for the wedding of Miss Kilmansegg, nor are those pictures on the vaults, advertisements, like yours in your railway stations;—all the arts of England bent on recommending you cheap bathing machines and painless pills. Here are purer baths and medicines told of; here have been more ingenious engineers. From the Sinai desert, from the Sion rock, from the defiles of Lebanon, met here the ghosts of ancient builders to oversee the work,—of dead nations, to inspire it: Bezaleel and the maids of Israel who gave him their jewels; Hiram and his forgers in the vale of Siddim—his woodmen of the Syrian forests;—David the lord of war, and his son the Lord of Peace, and the multitudes that kept holyday when the cloud filled the house they had built for the Lord of All;—these, in their myriads stood by, to watch, to guide;—it might have been, had Venice willed, to bless.

Literally so, mind you. The wreathen work of the lily capitals and their archivolts, the glass that keeps unfaded their colour—the design of that colour itself, and the stories that are told in the glow of it,—all these were brought by the Jew or the Tyrian, bringing also the treasures of Persia and Egypt; and with these, labouring beside them as one brought up with them, stood the Athena of Corinth, and the Sophia of Byzantium.



Not in vicious luxury these, yet—though in Tyrian splendour glows St. Mark's;—nor those quiet and trim little houses on the right, joining the Campanile. You are standing, (the work is so completely done that you may soon fancy yourself so,) in old St. Mark's Place, at the far end of it, before it was enlarged; you may find the stone marking the whole length of it in the pavement, just opposite the easternmost door of the Café Florian. And there were none of those pompous loggie then, where you walk up and down before the café, but these trim, dainty, happily-inhabited houses, mostly in white marble and gold, with disks of porphyry;—and look at the procession coming towards you underneath them—what a bed of moving flowers it is! Not Birnam wood coming, gloomy and terrible, but a very bloom and garland of good and knightly manhood—its Doge walking in the midst of it—simple, valiant, actual, beneficent, magnificent king. Do you see better sights than this in St. Mark's Place now, in your days of progress?

Now, just to get some little notion how the figures are 'put in' by these scrupulous old formalists, take the pains to look closely at the first you come upon, of the procession on the extreme left,—the three musicians, namely, with the harp, violin, and lute. Look at them as portraits only:

you will not find more interesting ones in all the rooms. And then you will do well to consider the picture as a reality for a little while, and so leave the Academy with a vision of living Venice in your heart. We will look at no more painting, to-day.



